15 August 1976

Assessing that senior US official

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WASHINGTON — This is a story about the mysterious "senior US official" who for eight years has been globetrotting on Henry Kissinger's plane, issuing lofty pronouncements and opinions.

His authoritative observations — on issues of the day, on the prospects of sensitive negotiations, indeed on chances of war and peace — are taken most seriously by world leaders and the public in general.

Thus he is one of the most powerful and influential men in the US government. But ground rules imposed on the dozen or so newsmen who travel with him forbid unmasking him by name and title.

What he is:

Witty, charming, informative, liked, misleading, abused, cunning, protected.

This self-same "senior US official" was very much in evidence on Air Force Three, a specially fitted-out Boeing 707 jet when Secretary of State Kissinger made a recent eight-day jaunt, probably one of his last in high government office, to London; Teheran, Iran; Kabul, Afghanistan; Lahore, Pakistan; Deauville, France, and The Hague.

The official is to his accompanying press corps, informative, witty, charming, illusive, misleading, cunning, liked, distrusted, abused and protected, all in the course of a working trip abroad. He has raised the practice of manipulating the press to an art form of diplomacy.

Reporters know they are being used, but, to varying degress, they tend to go along anyway, fascinated, spellbound, flattered to be so intimately associated with a man of such unusual intellect and style. These newsmen lash out in f
and occasionally in pri
waves, at the duplicity
proach. But they stop s
as to risk a divorce of
means too much to their
fessionally.

Not since the heyd
Kennedy has any ranki
been so adept at using t
policy purpose.

On each Kissinger fl
Service men and secret
compartment, while Kissinger, other State Department officials and some wives sit in a forward compartment, which includes an airborne office and a sleeping suite.

On each long flight between stops the "senior US official" customarily talks to reporters both formally, with all of them grouped around him in his office, and informally in conversations with a few at a time in the aisle in the rear section.

In the formal sessions, the official makes some statements, comments on some of their stories which offended or pleased him, and answers questions. Tape recorders are permitted in such briefings because the noise of the engines sometimes makes it hard to hear every word.

Thus, even though reporters are not permitted to quote the man by name, they can review his words by replaying the tapes back at their seats and then write their stories, portable typewriters cradled on their knees or on serving trays. The source is obviously well-informed, but there is no earthly way for the reporters to check what he has just said, unless they happen to have some independent knowledge on the subject.

On the flight from London to Teheran, for example, a newsman asked the official to comment on stories that the Russians on July 4 and July 29 had detonated nuclear devices that may have been of yields higher than permitted under a draft treaty on nuclear weapons tests.

He first disparaged the report as being politically motivated. Then he suggested the range of uncertainty was somewhere between 100 and 200 kilotons. The pact bans tests over 150 kilotons. If careful additional analysis, which was ordered after a meeting of the National Security Council's Verification Panel, showed the test was at the upper range, he said, the United States would do something, presumably demand an explanation from the Russians about the suspected violation of the spirit of the agreement.

Asked about the second test, which reportedly was larger than the first and was almost missed because it came minutes after an earthquake in Russia, the official said he had seen no data on a second one.

This reporter happened, by chance, to have done some reporting on the subject in Washington a few days before and had been told on good authority that the first test